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DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/CEN

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SUBJECT: TAJIKISTAN BANS THE SALAFIS - WHO'S NEXT?

REF: A. (A) BISHKEK 43

[B](#). (B) 2008 DUSHANBE 1409

[C](#). (C) 2008 STATE 132457

Classified By: Ambassador Tracey A. Jacobson, reason 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#). (C) Summary: The Tajik Supreme Court pronouncement outlawing the Salafis is the latest step in the government's attempts to reduce the influence of religion in Tajik politics. The measure may reduce the influence of the group, primarily because) unlike other government restrictions) traditional Islamic leaders are opposed to the Salafis. Traditional religious leaders welcomed the ban, but hoped it would not lead to arrests, prosecutions, or other confrontation. It is unclear how the government will implement the ban, since there is no organization to actually close down. The ban portends more repression of all but a few religious organizations. End Summary.

[2](#). (U) On January 8, following an application by the Prosecutor General's Office, the Supreme Court added the "Salafiya organization" to the list of extremist organizations that are banned in Tajikistan. Hizb-ut-Tahrir is on the same list. The Supreme Court announced its decision in a press release, saying the Salafis threatened "national unity and stability." Following the pronouncement, the government said it would seize Salafi literature and prevent Salafis from praying in mosques.

[3](#). (SBU) The ban comes after recent indications of growing official hostility to the Salafis (Ref A). In late 2008, regional prosecutors began calling for the government to ban the sect. The head of the government-influenced Council of Ulamo, Amonullo Ne'matzoda equated the Salafis with "Wahhabism" in a sermon at the Dushanbe Central Mosque. He announced that Salafis were not welcome in Tajikistan's mosques, and said the religious differences the Salafis and Wahhabis introduced were some of the main causes of the civil war of the 1990s. He warned that the Salafis threatened to split Tajik religious society. Many religious Tajiks consider Ne'matzoda to be merely a government stooge, and characterization of the Salafis may reflect official views of the movement.

REACTIONS - YES TO BAN, NO TO PROSECUTION

[4](#). (C) The issue is one of the few on which Tajikistan's traditional Islamic leaders and government officials can agree; the influential religious leaders and brothers Hoji Akbar Turajonzoda (a member of the upper house of Parliament and former Deputy Prime Minister) and Nuriddin Turajonzoda (one of the most influential imams in the country) each have

come out publicly against the group. Hoji Akbar Turajonzoda said the ban would push young Tajiks from the "wrong path" which they joined because of ignorance. At the same time, he did not believe the Salafis should face prosecution, saying they had broken no laws and could not be compared to Hizb ut-Tahrir. But he called Salafism "an imported ideology" which could pose a threat to national security. Islamic Revival Party Chairman Muhiddin Kabiri said he was surprised by the ban, since the government as recently as last year had said Salafis committed no illegal acts, implying they posed no threat to security. He urged that the ban "not entail repressive measures." Salafi leader Muhammadi Rahmatullo told reporters there was no Salafi organization to ban, only a loose movement of common belief. He said he would act in accordance with Tajik law.

ACADEMIC GIVES RATIONALE

15. (C) Pol/Econ Officer met with Abdullo Rahn Timerov, an expert on religion in Tajikistan at the Strategic Research Center, on January 14 to get his views on the ban. Timerov is a frequent embassy contact, formerly studied in the United States, and now studies religious issues at the President's think tank. (What appeared to be a State Security employee sat a short distance away from us in the central Dushanbe cafe, watching, ordering nothing, and leaving when we left).

16. (C) Timerov characterized the government as indifferent to specific religious practices; its main concern was that conflicts not arise between religious groups which might then threaten stability. Had the Salafis represented the mainstream in Tajikistan, the government would have supported them and banned other Islamic groups. The government's previous tacit support for Salafis had been based on their usefulness as a counterweight to the IRPT and to the traditional (Hanafi) Ulema. The Salafis were hostile to the IRPT because of its inclusion of Shia Muslims and because of the IRPT's very participation in politics. Salafis were hostile to the Ulema because they were moderate Hanafis. In tacitly supporting Salafism, the government had deceived itself about its ability to use the Salafis, and showed its "political illiteracy."

17. (C) The government had come to see Salafis as a threat to stability, and to the cultural identity of Tajikistan. Timerov speculated that official tolerance of Salafism had also irritated Iran and Russia. He said Salafis were uninterested in Tajik-Persian history and culture, and explicitly opposed the Hanafi interpretation of Islam prevalent in Tajikistan. Their appeal was in opposition to Tajik official efforts to promote a Tajik cultural identity based on local history. The Salafi movement was particularly hostile to Shias, and thus extremely hostile to the Ismaili Shia population of Badakhshan. In August 2008 IRPT leader Kabiri had called Tajikistan's Ismaili community "brothers" during an IRPT party meeting. Salafi leader Rahmatullo responded to this in a sermon in which he said Kabiri was befriending "kafirs." Given the history of Ismaili secessionism during the civil war, Ismaili-Sunni relations was one can of worms the government didn't want to open.

18. (C) The ban on Salafis, however, also showed the government's political illiteracy. The security services could not approach problems of factionalism subtly, instead reflexively reaching for the blunt instrument of a total ban. He lamented that Tajik government leaders lacked the intellectual wherewithal to consider anything but heavy-handed tactics, and suggested that if the government had simply voiced some criticism of Salafis, it would have sent a sufficiently clear message to them. The political "value," as he put it, that the Tajik government offered was a simplistic stability; it did not have any vision for pursuing other values such as economic development and political pluralism.

19. (C) Timerov said that many Tajiks, including journalists, believed the United States either created or supported the

Salafis in Tajikistan. Dushanbe newspapers have commented that the United States likely funded Salafis because of the United States' interest in destabilizing other countries as a general principle of our foreign policy. Some had also heard a rumor that Salafis working on the construction of the new U.S. Embassy compound in Dushanbe had used the construction site for prayers, a fact suggesting USG support for them (note: Post does not know whether there is any truth to this rumor).

MORE WHERE THAT CAME FROM

¶10. (C) During a court hearing for the Jehovah's Witnesses in November 2008, a Ministry of Culture expert told embassy political specialist that soon only a small number of traditional religions would be allowed in Tajikistan: mainstream Hanafi Islam, Orthodox and Catholic Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, and perhaps a few well-established Protestant Christian churches. As for the Salafi ban, as of QJanuary 21, post is not aware of any specific actions taken against Salafis; however, the Chief of Police of Sughd Oblast announced on January 15 that he had a list of 156 Salafis, and was keeping watch on them. (Interestingly, Salafism has been known mainly as a southern phenomenon; we did not know it had any significant presence in the north.)

¶11. (C) Ambassador raised the issue of religious freedom (Ref C) with Presidential Foreign Relations Adviser Erkin Rahmatulloev on January 14. Ambassador emphasized the importance the United States placed on religious freedom, and the level of concern reftel demarche reflected. Rahmatulloev replied that the Tajik people, because of the experience of the civil war in which religious factions battled one another and the secular central government, had an "allergy to religion." The President was simply following public opinion in restricting religious freedom. Ambassador pointed out that many members of civil society and religious groups had expressed concern about the draft law on religion, so the allergy might be to government restrictions on religion, not to religion itself. Rahmatulloev said their criticism showed how free and open Tajik society was. He then said the President paid close attention to the law on religion, knowing religious freedom was a sensitive issue. He acknowledged that a restrictive law would only drive banned religious groups underground and radicalize their adherents, "as we were forced to do under the Soviet Union." Tajikistan would adopt a law which met OSCE commitments, he said.

COMMENT - WHEN ALL YOU HAVE IS A HAMMER

¶12. (C) Post has reported that the Tajik government has consistently undermined its own credibility because its religious policy is out of step with public sentiment. The ban on Salafis seems to have the blessing of the country's traditional religious leaders, who even may have suggested or encouraged it. However, having tried playing religious groups off each other, now the Government is lurching further in the direction of suppressing religion, in both cases (a) doing itself more harm than good, and (b) failing to understand the ideas and influences it is dealing with. As the government considers a more restrictive draft law on religion, it may emulate Kyrgyzstan's recently passed regressive law on religion (Ref A). The government also is showing the paucity of tools at its disposal, by risking an embarrassing confrontation with a fairly small group just as it did when it banned the wearing of hijabs in schools and universities in 2005. Further, when the government takes action against one religious group at the behest of another, it is more likely to exacerbate rather than reduce sectarian tensions.

¶13. (C) Comment Continued: As for the alleged USG support for Salafis, the rumor reflects the lack of accurate information on U.S. society and politics. In a region where all the governments claim legitimacy based on their ability to deliver "stability" - political quiet - the idea resonates that a foreign, non-ethnic and meritocratic political/economic system constitutes a threat to this

stability. This illustrates again the need for more U.S. education exchange programs and teaching programs in Tajikistan, such as the Peace Corps could provide, to expose young Tajiks to American cultural values. End Comment.
JACOBSON